

Editorial

Dreaming as Continuity of the Self

Psychological life is not confined to waking moments. When the body yields to sleep, the mind continues its quiet work: feeling, imagining, remembering, and transforming. The borders of selfhood soften, but they do not dissolve typically. Considering this, dreams do not represent interruptions of experience; they are continuations of it; another chamber within the same psychological architecture. This may wax philosophical, but as it turns out, empirical findings suggest that across waking and sleeping states, individuals think, feel, symbolize, defend, and discover using the same templates of the self (Hall & Nordby, 1972)

The current volume of *Individual Differences Research* examines this continuity. Rather than framing dreams as symptoms, curiosities, or isolated nocturnal events, this volume approaches them as meaningful extensions of personality, affect, and imagination. Dreaming becomes one setting in which the self conducts its ongoing “work.” Some minds weave emotion into image with ease; others maintain firmer boundaries; many do both across time and circumstance. These patterns do not appear random. Indeed, they reflect familiar individual differences in cognitive style, emotional openness, and self-organization.

Consciousness as a Developing, Dynamic System

A foundation for this volume is Rao’s (2008/2023) archival paper on dynamic-systems of consciousness. Conscious awareness is described as a developmental system, differentiating, integrating, and elaborating across early relational experience, symbolic capacity, language, and memory. In this view, waking thought and dreaming are not categorical opposites but different expressions of the same evolving consciousness. Dreaming becomes a fluid and generative mode of mental life, reflecting both emotional organization and imaginative freedom.

This conceptualization aligns with psychological boundary theories (Hartmann, 1998) and continuity models in dream science (Hall & Nordby, 1972; Domhoff, 1996). Minds vary in permeability between internal and external experience, between idea and affect, wake and sleep. Such individual differences help determine whether dreams are vivid, emotionally resonant, or symbolically expressive.

Dreams Carry the Signature of the Dreamer

The archival study by Schredl et al. (2004/2023) provides elegant evidence that dreams bear psychological fingerprints. Judges could identify a dreamer’s gender at above-chance rates from a single dream report. These results showed modest accuracy yet carry meaningful implications.

Dream content contains structure, perspective, and personal tone that together reflect stable dispositions. The dream may speak in image, but it speaks with reference to the dreamer.

Imagination, Absorption, and Emotional Experience in Sleep

The first new contribution in this volume begins with imagination. Kelly (2023) examines nonpathological fantasy proneness and absorption. These are traits that can be linked to curiosity, aesthetic engagement, and immersive inner life. Results indicate that curiosity-driven absorption, not fantasy proneness nor neuroticism, predicts nightmare frequency and nightmare distress. This finding reinforces a central theme: immersive cognitive style can deepen emotional dream experience, likely independent of pathology. The same openness that enriches waking imagination may invite vivid feeling at night. Nightmare dream experiences here are not framed as disorders, rather as a window into individuals' expressive modes of minds that remain active, permeable, and receptive across states (Freud, 1900/1955).

The Emotional Spectrum of Nighttime Experience

Wang and Bai (2023) further normalize dream affect by examining dysphoric dreams from the prior night. Distress about the dream emerged as a meaningful dimension, regardless of whether a bad dream resulted in awakening. Emotional intensity varied along a continuum rather than separating neatly into "nightmare" versus "bad dream." This dimensional perspective mirrors contemporary frameworks in individual differences research, where variation in response to internal experience is expected, not pathologized (Gross & John, 2003; McCrae, 1993).

Tools for Studying Intense Dream Experience

The last contribution in this volume by Cooper and Kelly (2023) builds on this continuum approach by refining measurement. ROC analyses for the Nightmare Experience Scale (NExS) suggest that self-reports can identify potential high-distress nightmare experiencers in nonclinical populations. The capacity to detect distressing nightmare experiences in otherwise normative samples strengthens efforts to map individual differences in experiential vulnerability, affect regulation, and symbolic processing without presuming disorder. In doing so, it advances inquiry into variations that may hold clinical relevance while remaining rooted in a nonpathological framework.

The Self Across States

Taken together, the contributions in this volume portray dreaming as a mode of psychological continuity (Hall & Nordby, 1972). Imagination persists; affect persists; personality persists. Dreaming minds are selves expressed through another register: symbolic, condensed, emotionally resonant, and perhaps more revealing. Individuals differ in how deeply they enter dream worlds, how vividly emotion takes shape in imagery, and how seamlessly sleep joins waking states. These are not merely sleep variables, they are meaningful signatures of the self.

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